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INFO AMEMBASSY ANKARA PRIORITY
ARAB-ISRAELI COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 03747

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SUBJECT: SYRIA AND IRAN ON LEBANON: WHO THREATENS WHOM?

REF: DAMASCUS 3628

11. CONFIDENTIAL - ENTIRE TEXT.

12. SUMMARY: IN ITS PRESENT SPARRING WITH IRAN, SYRIA PROBABLY DOES NOT HOLD A STRONG LEBANON CARD. IRAN NOW VIES WITH ISRAEL AS THE SECOND-MOST INFLUENTIAL FOREIGN POWER IN LEBANON, WHERE SHI'A FUNDAMENTALISM, NATURALLY ASSOCIATED WITH IRAN, HAS BECOME WELL-INGRAINED. SYRIA COULD CAUSE IRAN SHORT-TERM DIFFICULTIES BY TERMINATING THE IRANIAN PRESENCE IN BA'LBAKK, AND IT COULD AT GREAT COST ATTACK HIZBALLAH (JUST AS IT COULD THEORETICALLY ATTACK THE MARONITES). HOWEVER, TO DO SO WOULD NOT ONLY BE A DEPARTURE FROM SYRIA'S POST-1978 POLICY OF KEEPING COSTS DOWN IN LEBANON, IT WOULD RISK CHANGING THE SHI'A INTO ACTIVE ANTAGONISTS AGAINST SYRIA. THIS POTENTIALLY WOULD BE A NIGHTMARE FOR SYRIA, BOTH IN LEBANON AND WITHIN SYRIA ITSELF. END SUMMARY.

13. EVENTS SURROUNDING THE FAILURE OF THE IRAQI-SYRIA BORDER MEETING SUGGEST THAT THE IRAN-SYRIA RELATIONSHIP HAS SURVIVED A ROCKY PERIOD. THE PRINCIPAL IRRITANTS WERE SYRIA'S ECONOMIC NEED AND THE TWO COUNTRIES' SHARPLY DIVERGENT GOALS IN LEBANON. IF THE RELATIONSHIP SEEMS FOR THE MOMENT TO HAVE GONE BACK TO "NORMAL," IT IS EVIDENTLY BECAUSE THE IRANIANS HAVE GIVEN THE SYRIANS TO BELIEVE THAT OIL SUPPLY WILL RESUME WITHOUT SERIOUS DEMAND FOR PAYMENT EITHER FOR PRESENT OR PAST SHIPMENTS. BUT WHERE DOES LEBANON FIT INTO THE EQUATION? IT SEEMS AXIOMATIC THAT FUNDAMENTALIST IRAN AND SECULAR SYRIA ARE ON A LONG-TERM COLLISION COURSE IN LEBANON AND THAT THEY HAVE NOT ALTERED THEIR GOALS IN LEBANON, AND WILL NOT DO SO. IN THE MOST RECENT SPARRING, THE QUESTION ARISES WHETHER IRAN FELT CONSTRAINED BY THE PROSPECT OF A SYRIAN CLAMPDOWN AGAINST HIZBALLAH, OR--TO THE CONTRARY, AS SOME PRESS REPORTS HAVE SUGGESTED--WHETHER SYRIA FELT ALARMED OVER POSSIBLE IRAN/HIZBALLAH ACTIONS AGAINST SYRIAN INTERESTS. WHO THREATENS WHOM OVER LEBANON?

14. WE DOUBT THAT IRANIAN DEPUTY FOREIGN MINISTER BESHARATI DELIVERED BALD THREATS TO THE SYRIANS WHEN HE MADE HIS JUNE 5-15 TRIP TO SYRIA AND LEBANON. BUT WE ARE STRUCK BY THE BOLDNESS OF HIS PUBLIC STATEMENTS AND ACTIONS; THE HIGH LEVEL AT WHICH HE WAS RECEIVED IN DAMASCUS BEFORE AND AFTER GOING TO LEBANON--WHERE HE ENGAGED IN A NEGOTIATING TRACK ON THE CAMPS WAR SEPARATE FROM KHADDAM'S--; SYRIA'S POSITIVE PUBLIC STATEMENTS ON IRAN SIMULTANEOUS WITH THE FAILURE OF THE IRAQ-SYRIA BORDER MEETING; AND INDICATORS OF SYRIAN TIMIDITY TOWARD IRAN VIS-A-VIS LEBANON.

15. OF THESE INDICATORS, WE NOTE ESPECIALLY LEBANON BA'TH PARTY CHIEF 'ASIM QANSUH'S REMARKS JUNE 12 (REFTEL). QANSUH WAS PROVEN WRONG ABOUT SYRIAN MILITARY INTERVENTION AT MASHGHARA--THE SYRIANS DID EVENTUALLY AND TARDILY INTERVENE--AND ONE FACTOR IN SYRIAN HESITANCY MAY HAVE BEEN CONCERN ABOUT ISRAELI REACTION. NEVERTHELESS, IT IS CLEAR FROM WHAT QANSUH SAID THAT THE SYRIANS WERE RELUCTANT TO TAKE ON HIZBALLAH AND OFFEND IRAN.

¶6. IN OUR VIEW, NEITHER SYRIA NOR IRAN IS IN A POSITION IN LEBANON TO BE ABLE TO DELIVER THREATS. EACH HAS REASON TO BE ALARMED AT THE OTHER'S ACTIVITIES AND AMBITIONS IN LEBANON, BUT THE STAKES ARE TOO HIGH ELSEWHERE--FOR SYRIA, THE PROSPECT OF VIRTUALLY FREE OIL IN LARGE QUANTITY--TO ALLOW LEBANON TO SOUR THE OVERALL RELATIONSHIP.

¶7. SYRIA HAS GIVEN IRAN A FEW KNOCKS IN LEBANON, BUT NONE OF THESE HAS BEEN LARGE ENOUGH TO HARM THE RELATIONSHIP. SYRIA CLAMPED DOWN ON IRAN'S SUNNI ALLIES IN TRIPOLI, IT HAS ENGAGED IN OCCASIONAL ALTERCATIONS WITH HIZBALLAH, AND NOW IT HAS INTERVENED IN MASHGHARA BECAUSE OF HIZBALLAH'S ATTACKS AGAINST ITS SSNP ALLY. BUT WHAT SYRIA HAS FAILED TO DO IS MUCH MORE IMPRESSIVE. THE IRANIAN GUARD PRESENCE IN SYRIAN-"CONTROLLED" LEBANON CONTINUES AS BEFORE; IRAN CONTINUES TO MOVE SUPPLIES TO HIZBALLAH VIA SYRIA, VIRTUALLY UNIMPEDED; AND THE SYRIANS HAVE BEEN LIMP AND INEFFECTUAL IN PUSHING IRAN ON THE HOSTAGES. MEANWHILE, AS HIZBALLAH HAS GAINED IN STRENGTH IN RECENT YEARS, SO HAS IRANIAN INFLUENCE IN LEBANON INCREASED MARKEDLY. IRAN NOW, WE WOULD JUDGE, VIES WITH ISRAEL AS THE SECOND-MOST INFLUENTIAL FOREIGN POWER IN LEBANON.

¶8. BY ALLOWING A REVOLUTIONARY GUARD PRESENCE AND GIVING THE IRANIANS EASY ACCESS SINCE 1982, SYRIA MAY HAVE ACCELERATED THE PACE OF GROWTH OF HIZBALLAH AND IRANIAN INFLUENCE. HOWEVER, THE IRANIAN REVOLUTION IS THE SINGLE MOST DYNAMIC AND ALLURING MOVEMENT IN THE MIDDLE EAST OVER THE PAST DECADE; IT WAS BOUND TO HAVE AN EXTRAORDINARY IMPACT ON THE LEBANESE SHI'A COMMUNITY. IT IS OPEN TO QUESTION HOW MUCH SYRIA COULD HAVE DONE TO STEM THE TIDE. THERE ALWAYS WERE, AND STILL ARE, OTHER ROUTES--THAN THROUGH SYRIA--FOR IRAN TO REACH AND INFLUENCE THE HIGHLY RECEPTIVE LEBANESE SHI'A. THE SYRIANS HAVE ACTIVELY ATTEMPTED TO COUNTERBALANCE THE IRANIANS BY GIVING SUPPORT TO NABIH BARRI, BUT WITH WHAT LONG-TERM EFFECT REMAINS TO BE SEEN.

¶9. SYRIANS OCCASIONALLY TELL US THAT THEY WILL BE ABLE TO CONTAIN THE LEBANESE SHI'A "WHEN THE NEED ARISES." HOWEVER, WE THINK THAT THEIR BOAST IS HOLLOW AND THAT THE SYRIANS WELL KNOW IT. THEY HAVE MADE THE BEST OF THE SITUATION BY MILKING THE IRANIANS--KEEPING THAT RELATIONSHIP BOTH CORDIAL AND LUCRATIVE--WHILE ATTEMPTING TO BOLSTER BARRI. THE FUTURE MUST BE WORRISOME.

¶10. THE REAL TEST OF WHETHER SYRIA CAN OR WILL ACT AGAINST IRAN/HIZBALLAH WILL COME IF IRAN'S PROMISES OF CONTINUED OIL DELIVERIES PROVE FALSE. EVEN THEN, HOWEVER, WE WOULD PREDICT THAT THE SYRIANS WILL MOVE IN A GINGERLY FASHION. THE ULTIMATE PROSPECT IS OF A LEBANESE SHI'A COMMUNITY ALIENATED FROM SYRIA AND, POSSIBLY, WITH IRANIAN SUPPORT ENERGIZED TO COMBAT SYRIA. IF SYRIA WENT TOO FAR IN ALIENATING IRAN/HIZBALLAH, IT MIGHT EVEN FACE AN ACTIVE IRANIAN/HIZBALLAH EMBRACE OF THE SYRIAN MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD. THE MOST RADICAL (ALSO THE MOST DANGEROUS) ELEMENTS OF THE BROTHERHOOD ARE ANTAGONISTIC TO IRAN BECAUSE OF IRANIAN SUPPORT FOR THE HERETICAL ALAWI BA'THI REGIME; IF THAT SUPPORT WERE REMOVED, THE NATURAL AFFINITY THAT IRAN HAS FOR THIS GROUP WOULD PRESUMABLY COME TO THE FORE. THE PRECEDENT FOR FUNDAMENTALIST SUNNI-SHI'A COOPERATION HAS ALREADY BEEN ESTABLISHED IN TRIPOLI.

¶11. IN ANY CASE, A STRONG SYRIAN MOVE AGAINST HIZBALLAH WOULD RUN AGAINST THE GRAIN OF SYRIAN POLICY IN LEBANON AS ESTABLISHED OVER THE PAST EIGHT YEARS. AT THE BEGINNING OF THE CIVIL WAR (1976-78) SYRIA INTERVENED DIRECTLY IN MAJOR FIGHTING, AT GREAT COST; SINCE THEN IT HAS PURSUED A LOW-COST POLICY, TRYING TO BALANCE PARTIES AGAINST EACH OTHER AND USING PROXIES IN LIMITED ENGAGEMENTS. DESPITE PREDICTIONS TO THE CONTRARY AND DESPITE THE EMBARRASSING FAILURE OF THE TRIPARTITE ACCORD, THE SYRIANS HAVE BACKED OFF FROM ATTACKING THE MARONITES. THE PROSPECT OF A FULL-SCALE ATTACK AGAINST HIZBALLAH IS EVEN MORE REMOTE.

¶12. HOWEVER, LIMITED ENGAGEMENTS ARE BOUND TO CONTINUE. MASHGHARA IS A CASE IN POINT. THE SYRIANS ARE ESPECIALLY NERVOUS ABOUT SOUTHERN LEBANON, BECAUSE OF THE POTENTIAL THERE FOR ROUSING THE ISRAELIS. THE SHI'A OF SOUTHERN LEBANON HAVE ALSO, THUS FAR, BEEN THE LEAST RECEPTIVE TO HIZBALLAH. WITH MASHGHARA THE SYRIANS MAY BE NERVOUSLY DRAWING A LINE WHICH THEY HOPE HIZBALLAH AND IRAN WILL ACCEPT, FOR THE TIME BEING.

¶13. BEIRUT MINIMIZE CONSIDERED.

RANSOM